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What Program Managers Need to Know

A New Book to Accelerate Acquisition Competence

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The first responsibility of the key leaders in the acquisition workforce is to think.

—Frank Kendall
Under Secretary of Defense for
Acquisition, Technology, and
Logistics

The Department of Defense (DoD) acquisition management process is complex. Despite the DoD's best efforts to standardize acquisition processes and strategies, running a large acquisition program rarely lends itself to a "checklist" approach. Success as a program manager (PM) requires not only understanding acquisition principles, processes and terminology but also attaining a sound working knowledge of the acquisition functional areas—contracting, financial management, systems engineering and integrated logistics.

The Defense Acquisition University (DAU) provides quality training in the processes, terminology, skills and functional expertise acquisition professionals need in order to succeed. DAU also has created several outstanding

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“case-based” courses that allow senior acquisition professionals to capture lessons learned from real-world programs.

But classroom-based acquisition training doesn’t always “meet the needs” of the acquisition community. Sometimes it’s difficult for a busy PM to find the time for an acquisition course that might take as long as 10 weeks to complete. PMs may also be pressed into service from another career field or after several years of career broadening and find themselves in need of a rapid tutorial or quick refresher. Occasionally there’s just a mismatch between the demands of a particular program and the lessons that the existing curriculum offers. Finally, as Under Secretary Kendall suggests in the quote above, critical but intangible skills like ethics and judgment also are difficult to impart via formal training. Training also is an incomplete substitute for experience. The “school of hard knocks” often is the best training ground for acquisition professionals.

This left us wondering ... given the complex nature of the program management profession, the demands it places on a typical PM’s time and the value of acquisition experience, is there a way to accelerate the competence building of our junior and mid-level acquisition workforce members?

We’re not sure, but many of the acquisition professionals we consulted with pointed to the lack of a concise and comprehensive “how to” guide. Such a guide would provide practical advice across the range of diverse topics and issues with which a PM needs to be familiar. With this in mind, we set out to create an easy-to-digest book that lends itself to either a cover-to-cover read or targeted reference as needs merit. Acknowledging the importance of context-based training, we included a number of real-world examples. And although we believe senior PMs will find it useful, the contents provide a beginners’ guide and quick reference to the foundation of program management. We’ve titled it *A Guide for DoD Program Managers—90 Percent of What Department of Defense Program Managers Need to Know to Run an Effective and Efficient Program*. DAU is e-publishing the book for acquisition professionals on DAU’s website at www.dau.mil/publications/pages/guide-books.aspx. Below, we briefly describe the contents of the book and provide some examples of ways we’ve attempted to make it easy to digest as an “airplane read.”

In addition to an initial review of “The Basics,” the book has three main sections: (1) “Tools of the Trade”; (2) “Critical Artifacts”; and (3) “Intangibles.” Each of these sections is further broken into sub-sections and subordinate pieces as needed to cover each topic. For example, “The Basics” section includes (no surprises here) cost, schedule, performance and risk sub-sections. The goal is not to provide the comprehensive reference—that is why the *DAU Guidebook* exists—but rather to provide a readable synopsis along with experience accelerators in the form of “Proverbs for PMs” and useful quotes.

Although we have condensed the book to what we consider the “bare minimum” necessary to successfully lead an


acquisition program, not everyone will have time to read it continuously from end to end. So we’ve employed a few presentation techniques and quickly comprehended features to ease the reader’s experience and emphasize key points. We make abundant use of graphics and tables, include quotes from members of the acquisition community and prominent historical figures, highlight important “Proverbs for PMs” and include acquisition stories that illustrate key points.

The analogy we use to help explain the role of the PM is that of expedition leader—responsible for the safety of the team and overall outcome but also reliant on team experts to accomplish particular portions of the mission. Accordingly, the major sections of the book—“Tools of the Trade”; “Critical Artifacts”; and “Intangibles”—broadly apply to both adventurers and PMs. Below are brief descriptions of each section and the appendices that include some useful and entertaining checklists.

The Tools of the Trade (section 1) is the longest and is intended to provide a foundational understanding of key functional areas for all programs—financial management, contracting and systems engineering. We also provide a brief discussion of three other “tools” that we have found very useful—“battle rhythm,” earned value management and independent reviews of the program.

Critical Artifacts (section 2) identifies the documents to which a PM must pay particular attention as these documents will very likely determine success or failure. The four documents we have found most critical for program success are the Acquisition Strategy, the Acquisition Program Baseline (APB or just “Baseline”), the Integrated Master Plan (IMP) and the Integrated Master Schedule (IMS).

Intangibles (section 3) may be the most important section of the book (we debated moving it to the front for this reason). Section 3 discusses ways to think about the role of PM. We do this by looking closely at (1) integrity (three subtly different definitions of the word), (2) leadership and (3) collaboration and compromise.

Although acquisition is not a checklist activity, some checklists initiate or challenge our thinking. To that end, we also included an appendix that captures items such as “Battle’s Law—Principles of Program Management from 1961” and “Norm Augustine’s Checklist for an Acquisition Adventure—A Formula for Failure.” We hope readers will find these both enlightening and entertaining and that the book will help you and your team members succeed in the complex business of DoD acquisition management. Although our subtitle “90 Percent of What Department of Defense Program Managers Need to Know to Run an Effective and Efficient Program” may be optimistic, we hope that this book will “accelerate acquisition competence.” 

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